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International volunteer tourism as (de)commodified moral consumption

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Chapter 4

**International volunteer tourism as (de)commodified moral
consumption**

Peter Smith

Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed a growing literature on ‘moral’ or alternative tourism that links the behaviour and purchasing habits of consumers to development outcomes in developing countries (see Krippendorff, 1987; Patullo, 1996; Scheyvens, 2002; Weaver, 2008; Buckley, 2008; Fennell, 2008; Pattullo and Minelli, 2009; Wearing and Neil, 2009, among others). This emergence is in contrast to classical views of political economy which consider leisure as a discreet area lying outside of politics (Rojek, 2001). This transition in tourism has a strong affinity with moral consumer markets in that through our consumer habits we can make companies more moral, favour products that are deemed more sustainable or are fairer for the producers combined with concern for other issues such as the environment (Lury, 1996; Paterson, 2006). Volunteer tourism is now widely recognised as an important and growing segment of the alternative tourism sector. In the last decade a significant body of literature has emerged on volunteer tourism in tourism studies, human geography and related disciplines.

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By way of a formal definition Wearing's (2001: 1) foundational study defines volunteer tourists as tourists who, 'undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment'. Volunteer tourists, primarily young people from Western countries, devote a proportion of their leisure time to volunteer projects largely in developing countries. More prosaically McGehee and Santos (2005: 760) define volunteer tourism as 'utilizing discretionary time and income to travel out of the sphere of regular activity to assist others in need'. Volunteer tourism can, therefore, be characterized as a form of moral consumption, the aim of which is to assist conservation and community well-being goals in the global South.

Recent studies interrogate volunteer tourists' motivations and experiences (McGehee, 2002; Brown and Lehto, 2005; McGehee and Santos, 2005; Cousins, 2007; Coghlan, 2006, 2007 and 2008); focus on the attitudes of the host community to the volunteer projects (Broad, 2003; Clifton and Benson, 200; McGehee and Andereck, 2009; Sin, 2010; Barbieri et al., 2012) or take a case-study approach to exploring volunteer tourism projects (see contributions to Lyons and Wearing, 2008a; Benson, 2011) to name a few. This literature, like much of the advocacy of moral tourism more broadly, tends to focus on small-scale, community oriented tourism that explicitly aims to promote both conservation and host community well-being (Mowforth and Munt 1998; Butcher, 2007). Despite this emerging body of literature, volunteer tourism is acknowledged as being under-theorised and critical studies are lacking

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(Sin, 2009; Vrasti, 2009; Wearing, 2010; Conran, 2011; McGehee, 2012). Indeed the benefits to the host communities from volunteer projects are often accepted without question and the views and opinions of host communities are largely absent from the literature (Guttentag, 2011). This chapter contributes to emerging research in critical tourism studies on the discourse of volunteer tourism.

It has been argued that volunteer tourists are ‘alternative’ tourists (Brown and Lehto, 2005; Novelli, 2005; Pearce and Coghlan, 2008); at the committed end of a spectrum of ethical tourism (Coghlan, 2006) and part of ‘hard’ rather than ‘soft’ ecotourism (Weaver, 2008). It has also been suggested that volunteers represent a significant force in the development of ecotourism in the global South (Duffy, 2002). Volunteer tourists are considered as committed moral tourists (Cousins, 2007); sharing many of the characteristics of ecotourism (Wearing, 2001) and ‘new moral’ tourism (Butcher, 2003). Indeed, Lyons and Wearing (2008c: 153) have argued that the ideological proposition of volunteer tourism is to provide a sustainable alternative to mass tourism.

Volunteer tourism is certainly motivated by altruism (Soderman and Snead, 2008; Matthews, 2008) in contrast to mass tourism, which is usually characterised as self-interested, carefree or pejoratively labelled hedonistic pleasure seeking (Singh, 2004). Volunteer tourists’ desire to ‘make a difference’ contributes to expanding what has been discussed as the ‘geographies of care’ (Popke, 2006). Care is considered as the active interest of one person in the well-being of another (Silk, 2000). For Popke (2006) the desire to care for others is a moral and ethical issue that can be the basis

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for an alternative ethical outlook: through caring for others the moral position of the individual is acted out. Smith (2000: 93) suggests that in a more globalised world, with greater economic interdependence, there is an increased capacity to harm others in distant places through our consumption patterns. As such, the ethics of care can and should be extended beyond people we have existing contact or relationships with, such as friends and family members, towards ‘different and distant others’, who we have no personal connection with and who are dispersed in time and space (Smith, 1998; Silk, 1998). Fair trade is often cited as an example of this type of care for others through moral consumption (Barnett et al., 2005; Nicholls and Opel, 2005; Jackson, 2006). Here there is an overlap with the practice of volunteer tourism, where volunteers purchase products that aim to help and assist host communities in the global South.

Volunteer tourism could be seen as an exemplar of moral consumption that embodies a concept of the geographies of care; with volunteer tourists caring for ‘distant others’. Silk (2004: 231) suggests that with normal acts of aid-giving the donor, or carer, never meets or hears from the intended beneficiary, yet in volunteer tourism they do: with NGOs or gap year companies acting as a bridge between the volunteers and the communities in need (Keese, 2011: 258). Further, through sharing a physical space with the host community the volunteer tourist experience is less charity from afar; commendable ‘caring at a distance’ for distant others but more active caring *in situ* (Sin, 2010: 984-985). Thus volunteer tourism is seen as having the potential to bridge the spatial distance between the giver and receiver of moral concern and altruistic intent associated with ethical consumption. Volunteer projects aim to

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alleviate poverty in the developing world and bring consumers – in this case the volunteers – face-to-face with the consequences of under-development to host communities, alongside the need to conserve natural habitat and capital. For these reasons, volunteer tourism has become the new ‘poster-child’ for alternative tourism (Lyons and Wearing 2008b: 6).

One area where there is a developing critique is a discussion of the experience and practice of volunteer tourism. Whilst altruism may certainly be a key factor in volunteers’ motivations, studies suggest participation in volunteer projects is not exclusively altruistic (Mustonen, 2005; Coghlan 2006; Broad and Jenkins, 2008; Sin, 2009). For example, it has been suggested the volunteer tourism experiences can express a desire to gain ‘cultural capital’, with curriculum vitae building and personal and professional development motivations playing an important role in the experience (Halpenny and Caissie, 2003; Cousins, 2007; Palacios, 2010). Jones (2011) argues that through volunteering young people gain preparatory experience and informal training in cultural sensitivity which benefits them in their careers in the corporate world. Drawing on fieldwork among volunteer tourists in Africa, Sin (2009) argues that volunteers’ motivations are in part altruistic but are also heavily associated with personal or ‘self’ development. For example, she suggests that experiencing something ‘exotic’, or Other are key motivations for volunteering. Similarly, Barbieri et al (2012) in their study of volunteer tourists in Rwanda conclude that self-development is a key motivation for project participants alongside bonding with the host community and experiencing the local lifestyle.

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Butcher and Smith (2010) argue that this concern for volunteers' self-development and exploration, including the desire to experience host communities first hand, is aligned to personal 'life politics' and an individual approach to the politics of development. It has been suggested that it would be useful to develop a scale of commitment among volunteer tourists which would identify 'shallow' commitment on one side of the spectrum and 'deep' commitment on the other (Callanan and Thomas, 2005). It is predicted that those at the more committed end of the spectrum would cite ethical values as an important motivating factor informing their decision to volunteer.

Advocates of volunteer tourism suggest that it is an alternative form of consumption with the potential to challenge the dominant 'neoliberal paradigms of tourism' (Higgins-Desbiolles and Mundine, 2008: 182). Critics of volunteer tourism on the other hand argue that it embodies particular features of neoliberalism, where the "guests" are objectified or 'Othered' and neocolonial Western agendas and images inform volunteers' perceptions of people in the global South (Baillie-Smith and Laurie, 2011: 556; McGehee and Andereck, 2008:18-19; Guttentag, 2009: 545-547; Sin, 2009: 496; Simpson, 2005; Brown and Hall, 2008; Caton and Santos, 2009; Palacios, 2010).

The Volunteer Tourism Industry

Volunteer tourism projects operate in many countries and are organised by a range of sending organisations including private companies, conservation and educational organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Broad, 2003; Soderman and Snead, 2008; Raymond and Hall, 2008). A survey of over 300 volunteer tourism

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organisations worldwide concluded that the market caters to 1.6 million volunteer tourists a year, with a monetary value of between £832m and £1.3bn (\$1.7bn - \$2.6bn). Growth in the sector has been most marked since 1990 (ATLAS/TRAM, 2008: 5). There is a focus on gap year aged volunteer tourists, normally in the 18-25 age range, which make up the primary market (Simpson, 2005: 447; ATLAS/TRAM, 2008: 5; Wearing, 2010: 213; Jones, 2011, 535).

This focus represents how a significant number of young people seek to act upon their world, outside traditional political channels, in the realm of the moral consumption of holidays. In the UK and elsewhere gap year projects are encouraged through schools, universities and government. Jones (2005: 87) argues that participation on a gap year project can benefit the individual, who gains cross-cultural experience and develops as a global citizen with insights and experience beyond the parochial. Here volunteering is seen as a way of developing cultural sensitivity and a sense of 'global citizenship', with concepts of volunteering and citizenship increasingly part of the curriculum of schools and universities (Advisory Group on Citizenship, 1998; Bednarz, 2003; Standish, 2008; Baillie-Smith and Laurie, 2011). Gap years are now accredited, structured and praised by politicians for this contribution to citizenship (Jones, 2004, 2011; Lyons et al., 2012). Pearce and Coghlan (2008) suggest that in the UK gap years are seen as almost an obligatory post-compulsory education experience and this recent cultural shift is the source of many younger volunteer tourists. Simpson (2005) has argued that the gap year experience is also seen by many employers as desirable and can thus be considered as a training ground for future professionals who accumulate 'cultural capital' through their volunteer work

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According to a UK government commissioned report on gap year provision (defined in the report as ‘a period of time between 3 and 24 months taken out of education or a work career’, hence a wider category than volunteer tourism), internationally there are over 800 organisations offering overseas volunteer placements in 200 countries in the global North and South. In total these organisations offer around 350,000 placements opportunities annually (Jones, 2004). Tourism Concern, a UK based charity who tend to look specifically at development and community based tourism, estimate that there are now around sixty organisations in the UK offering volunteer tourism placements (Tourism Concern, 2007: 1). These range from commercial companies to organisations operating in the NGO and voluntary sector. A 2007 Mintel study calculated that people undertaking volunteer projects abroad account for 10% of the UK’s outbound tourism expenditure: £960 million annually (Travel Weekly, 2007). In 2010 a further UK study estimated that up to 500,000 gap year students volunteered abroad. Their main activities included teaching English, animal conservation and building homes in poor rural communities (Neeves and Birgnall, 2010).

The large number of organisations involved in the gap year sector makes it hard to accurately assess the absolute number of volunteering destinations, organizations and range of activities. Volunteer tourism activities range from community work, such as building a school or clinic (Raleigh International, 2009); to teaching English (Jakubiak, 2012); to conservation based projects that involve scientific research or ecological restoration such as reforestation and habitat protection (Wearing, 2004: 217). In many ways, the volunteer tourism phenomenon has become a ‘rite of

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passage' (Wearing et al., 2008: 69) taken by increasing numbers of internationally mobile young people, in part, to do good, but also endorsed by commercial companies seeking professional employees with international experience and an appreciation of global issues.

Benefits to the Community or the Volunteer?

Despite many of the claims made for the impact of volunteers in host communities (Wearing, 2001, Wearing et al., 2005; Zahra and McIntosh, 2007; Ruhanen et al., 2008; Wearing and Ponting, 2009) others argue that the actual contribution to development is minimal and that the impacts on host communities are often assumed rather than researched (VSO, 2007; Clifton and Benson, 2006; Grey and Campbell, 2007; Barbieri et al., 2012). The lack of impact that the volunteer tourists have in host communities is often attributed to insufficient knowledge, inappropriate skills or weak qualifications to produce 'effective help' or even question the level of volunteers' altruistic intent (Salazar, 2004; Brown and Hall, 2008; McGehee and Andereck, 2009; Palacios, 2010: 863).

Volunteer tourists pay a significant fee for their programme. According to a report on UK gap year participants, the average UK gap-year traveller spends between £3,000-£4,000 on their trip (Neeves and Birnall, 2010). If this money were directly donated to a local community it could pay a greater amount of local labour than the individual volunteer could provide (Butcher and Smith, 2010: 33). Guttentag (2009) argues that it should not be assumed that the volunteers' aim of conserving a community's surrounding environment is shared by the community itself. Citing a number of case

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studies, he argues that volunteers are frequently more focused on their own promotion of environmental values than appreciating the host community's desire for economic development. In this way it is suggested that volunteer projects may actually impede the development desired by the host population. Guttentag rejects Wearing's (2001: 172-174) assertion that volunteer tourism promotes a 'genuine exchange' between the volunteer and host communities from which mutual learning results. Indeed Richter and Norman (2010) have suggested that volunteer tourists' contributions are often brief and the work done is usually low-skilled in nature. As a result, volunteer tourism labour may undermine the local labour market. Such criticisms have also been voiced by the veteran UK based volunteer organisation Voluntary Service Overseas, who favour long-term placements, utilising skilled graduates, over short-term voluntary projects (VSO, 2007). Yet, as Simpson (2005) suggests the lack of requirement for any particular expertise is in itself an element of the appeal of many volunteer or gap projects. Volunteer tourists are able to experiment with their identity and take on varying roles within the host community with little or no attention paid to their qualifications other than that of being an enthusiastic volunteer (Hutnyk, 1996: 44; Devereux, 2008: 363).

A number of studies suggest that volunteer tourism should be seen within the context of a dominant neoliberal approach to development, where the main beneficiaries of volunteers' participation in international projects are corporate companies seeking young professional employees with experience of working with people from other cultures (Simpson, 2005; Baillie-Smith and Laurie, 2011; Jones, 2011). Here the demand of global businesses for professionals with experience of working in

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international environments is seen as a part of a neoliberal agenda. Neoliberalism is considered an ideology that favours free market solutions and individual enterprise over state or collective led economic and social policies, with governments and companies of pursuing an aggressive 'market fundamentalism' (Stiglitz, 2010). For Harvey the essence of neoliberal theory is support for a minimal state and stressing the virtues of privatisation, masked by the rhetoric of liberty and individual freedom (Harvey, 2011). Critics charge neoliberals with ushering in a 'shock doctrine' approach to development (Klein, 2007) with corporate companies taking advantage of government privatisation of provision of goods and services (Hertz, 2002).

It is argued that a neoliberal approach sees international development as less a structural or political issue and more one susceptible to the market solutions of trade and commerce (Stiglitz, 2003, Hertz, 2005). One solution posed to global inequalities is moral consumption, such as fair trade in goods and services, enabling consumers to force a more ethical agenda onto companies through exercising choice in favour of products that are seen as more moral or in some way 'fairer' (Nicholls and Opal, 2005; Paterson, 2006). Volunteer tourism has been criticised for providing commodified products to meet the demands of these moral consumers (Lyons et al., 2012; Tomazos and Cooper, 2012; Mostafanezhad, 2013).

It is certainly the case that many western companies and organisations welcome the experience gained through international volunteering seeing it as a 'rite of passage.' Yet it is open to question the extent to which this represents a neoliberal form of development practice (Vodopivec and Jaffe, 2011: 112). If anything, contemporary

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international volunteering tends to be influenced more by post-development and neopopulist thinking, which links conservation and community well-being goals through small-scale projects, rather than economic development through structural change, international trade and commerce or even simple infrastructural development (Butcher and Smith, 2010). As such, it could be argued that volunteer tourism is less pursuit of a neoliberal development agenda but more a form of moral consumption that has taken the place of macro political outlooks that favour economic growth and social transformation of the global South. Today, such agendas are more likely to be eschewed as unsustainable or unrealistic (Escobar, 1995).

Decommodified Volunteer Tourism

In critiquing the aims and objectives of the commercial, commodified market for volunteer tourism products the work of Wearing (2001) has been particularly important in developing the concept of a decommodified form of volunteer tourism. This concept refers to not-for-profit organisations that offer products that are less informed by the need for profit making and more in tune with the needs of the host communities. Gray and Campbell suggest that the volunteer tourists desire for an authentic encounter with host communities is commercialised by profit seeking businesses and thus the desire to act altruistically is turned into a commodity to be commodified and sold (2007: 466).

In contrast, in its decommodified form, it is suggested that volunteer tourism offers a sustainable alternative to mass tourism; advocates note it for its potential to offer an opportunity for moral consumption of tourism products outside the 'dominant market-

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driven framework of commodified tourism and where profit objectives are secondary to a more altruistic desire to travel to assist communities' (Wearing, 2001: 12). Crucial to Wearing's conception of an ideal volunteer tourism is the involvement of the host community and a 'genuine exchange' of cultural practices, values and norms. Decommodified tourism products also enable host communities to define and manage development and conservation ideally including an 'ethics of care for nature' (Wearing, 2010).

Developing this concept further, Wearing and Ponting (2009) consider NGOs the best vehicle for delivering non commercial, not-for-profit ecotourism and volunteer tourism projects working with local communities in the developing world. In this way, it is argued that NGO volunteer tourism projects run counter to the 'commodified, normalizing and marketized nature of globalized Western tourism' (ibid: 257). In this sense then it is argued that volunteer tourism has the potential to act as 'ideal' ecotourism addressing many of the shortfalls and criticisms levelled at mainstream and commercial ecotourism projects, particularly accusations of 'greenwashing' (Wearing, 2001; Honey, 2002: 370; Buckley, 2003: xiv; Weaver and Lawton, 2007: 1174; Higgins-Desboilles, 2011: 565).

Advocates of a decommodified volunteer tourism acknowledge that the benefits accrued to the local community from volunteers' contributions are frequently limited. Yet they also suggest that the contribution to development cannot be measured simply in terms of the projects themselves. Through participation in a project the volunteer tourist makes 'a journey of self-discovery and self-understanding though the

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experience of life style alternatives' (Wearing, et al., 2008: 70). For Pearce and Coghlan (2008: 132) volunteer tourism enriches the sending society by developing a 'pool of personnel with experiences and an embodied awareness of global issues'. Wearing (2001: 3) highlights the long-term impacts the experience of volunteering can have in developing people who will, in the course of their careers and lives, act morally in favour of those less well off. Thus the experience of volunteering becomes '...an ongoing process which extends far beyond the actual tourist visit'.

While this long term impact of the volunteer encounter may be realized, it is also acknowledged that many volunteer tourists seek to affect change as a part of a self-conscious shaping of their own identity or their own sense of 'self' (Matthews, 2008; Wickens, 2011). This narrative addresses the individual rather than the society visited. Wearing (2001: 2) suggests that 'the most important development that may occur in the volunteer experience is that of a personal nature, that of a greater awareness of the self'. From a study of volunteers in Kenya, Lepp (2008: 98) concludes that many volunteers 'discovered an intrinsic need for meaning and purpose in their lives'. Similarly, Brown and Lehto (2005) have argued that volunteering can result in the 'self' rejecting materialism in favour of a more moral outlook particularly to others in the global South. McGehee (2012: 101) suggests that participation in the volunteer project is the key element in the consciousness-raising of the individual participant and for Zahra and McIntosh (2007) a greater sense of social justice and responsibility can result from participation in volunteer tourism projects. In this sense participation on a volunteer project provides a moral encounter where issues of global inequalities and development (or lack of) are experienced by the volunteer tourist firsthand.

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Conclusions

The emerging discourse of volunteer tourism is attractive because it offers young people the opportunity to experience and encounter moral questions through their interaction with poor communities in the global South (Zahra and McIntosh, 2007; Vodopivec and Jaffe, 2011). For advocates of a decommodified volunteer tourism consumption of these experiences offer opportunities outside the profit-seeking tourism industry to become aware of social inequalities, environmental and political issues or awareness of the causes of poverty, injustice and unsustainable development (McGehee, 2012; Devereux, 2008) with volunteer tourism seen as a further deepening of the moral concerns associated with ecotourism (Acott et al., 1998). Whilst the tangible benefits to host communities from volunteer projects is open to question (Richter and Norman, 2010; Barbieri et al., 2012) for both its commercial and decommodified advocates volunteers' self-improvement is a key benefit in terms of awareness of global inequalities and encouraging global citizenship (Raleigh International, 2009; Wearing and Ponting, 2009; Jones, 2011; Lyons et al., 2012). It is argued that communities hosting volunteer tourists become 'reflexive educators and interpreters' (Wearing and Ponting, 2009: 263); host communities thus provide sites of moral encounters for the visiting volunteer.

It may well be the case that NGOs aim to assist and empower communities in the developing world in contrast to more commercial volunteer tourism operations, however, this arrangement frequently involves community cooperation based on a pre-existing agenda rather than being premised on host communities' right to shape

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and define development agendas (Butcher, 2007: 74; Diprose, 2012: 190). The degree to which these communities have agreed to act as the site of moral encounter is unclear and the needs of the host community may be superseded by the interests of the volunteers or the funding NGO's priorities or agenda (Guttentag, 2009: 70). It seems advocates of decommodified, NGO based volunteer tourism projects as much as the more commercial, 'neoliberal' volunteer or gap year organisations rely on moral meaning being delivered to volunteers through these interactions, or encounters, with host communities in the global South.

Perhaps it would be better to see the discourse of volunteer tourism as a reversal of the 'politics of care' (Popak, 2006) and 'caring at a distance' (Silk, 2000, 2004) with host communities in the developing world acting not as passive receivers of volunteers' 'performances of care' (Sin, 2010: 987) or as 'needy beneficiaries' (Vodopivec and Jaffe, 2011: 13) but providers of moral encounters for paying tourists from the North. Why these moral meanings should be delivered by encounters with poor rural communities in the global South rather than at home; why a greater awareness of the self (Wearing, 2001); a greater sense of social justice and responsibility (Zahra and McIntosh, 2007) or simply positive change through personal experience (McGehee, 2012) cannot be formed in the volunteer's own country remain a critical moral question the discourse of volunteer tourism has yet to address.

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